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ABSTRACT

Recent research efforts have attempted to address the contradictory conclusions being drawn about the relative contribution of television and newspapers to citizen awareness of public affairs. The traditional view of newspapers' superiority has been challenged by those investigators who hold that the determinant factors rest with individuals--their motivation, their political orientation, and their ability to derive information from any source. Additional questions surround the difference between media exposure or use, and reliance or dependence upon those media. Some exposure may be passive, habitual, while other exposure is active, selective and analytical. All these factors are involved in the relationships between media use and social perceptions. This study examines the relationship between different measures of media use, reliance and social perceptions in the context of the continuing struggle in South Africa as reported in U.S. media. For black college students, media use and reliance play only a marginal role in the formation of impressions about the conflict. A reference list and six data tables are appended. (Author/TRS)

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Understanding Social Conflict: Media reliance and student perspectives on the struggle in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Understanding Social Conflict: Media reliance and student perspectives on the struggle in South Africa

Recent research efforts have attempted to address the contradictory conclusions being drawn about the relative contribution of television and newspapers to citizen awareness of public affairs. The traditional view of newspapers' superiority has been challenged by those investigators who hold that the determinant factors rest with individuals-- their motivation, their political orientation and their ability to derive information from any source. Additional questions surround the difference between media exposure or use, and reliance or dependence upon those media. Some exposure may be passive, habitual, while other exposure is active, selective and analytical. All these factors are involved in the relationships between media use and social perceptions.

This study examines the relationship between different measures of media use, reliance and social perceptions in the context of the continuing struggle in South Africa as reported in U.S. media. For Black college students, media use and reliance play only a marginal role in the formation of impressions about the conflict.

As we struggle to understand the role of the mass media in the dialectic of social history, we find ourselves returning periodically to address questions about the interaction between characteristics of the mass media and the orientation and behavior of various audiences. In most reviews of the literature on the effects of mass communication (Roberts and Bachen, 1981; Robinson, 1972), the observation that differential learning is associated with reliance upon different media is tempered by recognition that media differ in content and format, and that those attributes are supportive of learning different things from those media (Patterson, 1985; Woodnall, Davis and Sahin, 1983). Confidence in simple explanatory models is weakened further by evidence that motivations guiding media selection and use (Garramone, 1985; Petty, 1983), experience or familiarity with the subject (Findahl and Hoijer,1981), as well as quality of exposure and use (Rubin, 1984), all play some role in the determination of individual perspectives toward different issues of public concern.

Additionally, we have come to recognize that these relations vary with the nature of the issue (Clark and Fredin, 1978; Olien, Donohue and Tichenor, 1984) and the degree of involvement of the respondent in the activity surrounding the issue (Gandy and Coleman, 1985; Tan, 1980). Too few studies have made the attempt to examine more than a few of these contingent conditions within the context of a single study (McLeod and Reeves, 1981). This paper reports an attempt to examine the relationships between the use of, reliance upon and justifications for the use of particular media, involvement in a conflictual public issue, and different dimensions of knowledge about that issue.

Background

Media Reliance

Reliance upon television for news and information is generally associated with lower levels of knowledge than is related to reliance upon newspapers (Roberts and Bachen, 1981). It is argued that much of the difference in knowledge outcomes can be explained as a function of the characteristics of the two media. Television news is seen to be constrained by tradition to provide only brief glimpses or impressions of very complex social and political issues. Television news is often seen to be little more than visual headlines--useful perhaps for recalling names, faces and events, but hopelessly inadequate as a source of any deeper

understanding of the causes and consequences of those events. People who rely solely on television for their information about events in the world are thereby condemned to base their assessments of economic and political reality upon the slimmest of foundations. Whether they are moved to become actively involved in the issues that may ultimately determine the quality of their lives may depend in part upon their ability to link those fleeting video impressions with their own objective conditions. The apparent correlation between increasing voter apathy and growing television reliance among U.S. populations may suggest one answer to that question.

This is not to suggest that the visual imagery of television does not play an important role in the formation of public opinion or the mobilization of social action at a particular moment in the life of any given issue. Olien, Donohue and Tichenor (1984) suggest that conflicts tend to go through different phases, and different media assume different roles for the public in each of those phases. The visual, dramatic orientation of television appears to be more influential in the later stages of conflict when the quality of interaction becomes more confrontational and demonstrative. While television coverage may not provide the kind of detailed information which is thought to be desirable for informed citizen participation, the emotional impact of televised images heightens the salience of the issue and the key participants, and may make possible the movement of policymakers toward resolution of the conflict. It has been suggested (Ungar, 1985) that the increased salience of the South African conflict, heightened by coverage of demonstrations and brutal police reactions to them, made it possible for the Congress to push a reluctant president toward the imposition of economic sanctions.

Reliance upon one medium rather than another appears to be associated with particular characterics of individuals. Reliance upon television seems to characterize those who are less well educated, and thereby less capable of processing the more complex presentations common to the print media (Chaffee and Schendler, 1985). Thus, the educationally deprived are doubly handicapped by their reliance upon a medium constrained to deliver only impressions. Those who are more highly educated are capable from deriving somewhat more useful information from their television viewing, but they tend not to be dependent upon such a limited source (Culbertson and Stempel, 1985; Petty, 1983). Both the ability and the motivation to gather useful information from any medium seem to be necessary preconditions for the

derivation of any substantial knowledge gain from its use. This suggests that reliance and use are quite different aspects of media behavior.

Media Exposure

It is not surprising that greater interest in an issue, or greater motivation to learn about it is associated with deriving greater benefits from media exposure. Graber(1982) suggests that people ignore most of what is presented in the media. Even newspaper readers bypass the majority of the stories in the daily paper, and only read part of those they select. She suggests that the "inverted pyramid" style of journalistic writing reinforces the tendency toward reading only parts of stories. The stories which are ignored are usually avoided because they are about subjects of only marginal interest to their readers. Stories that are remembered have to be not only interesting, but they have to be simple to understand.

Because much media use is largely recreational, only the most highly motivated will do the work necessary to process the more difficult or unfamiliar material. Rubin (1984) suggests that there are important differences between the habitual or time consuming viewer of television news, and the more selective, instrumental viewer who is in search of information. Culbertson and Stempel (1985) suggest further that differences in knowledge associated with media use are really reflections of different degrees of intentionality in that use. Thus, to the extent that the amount of news media consumption is independent of the motivations for that use, neither measure by itself is sufficient to explain differences in any resultant learning (McLeod, Glynn and McDonald, 1983).

Garramone (1985) shares in the view that different motivations will result in the selection of different content from media channels. Media users are seen to prefer different message formats depending upon their reasons for attending to the media in the first instance. The selection of different media formats are based in part upon user beliefs about the quality of the content along different relevant dimensions. Thus, for example, media users concerned with the substance of the informational content may select those formats thought to be higher in objectivity than others; whereas, viewers seeking only diversion, may be less selective. Gandy and Coleman (1985) suggest that Black college students were selective viewers of television news about Jesse Jackson, tending to ignore the critical, negative commentary of journalists, focusing instead upon the positive attributes of Jackson as revealed in his debate

performances. Thus, while this population tended to be primarily television reliant, they were highly critical of the fairness of the media, and thereby rejected much of the content presented. This view is consistent with that of McLeod, Petty, Kosieki and Tanjong (1985), who suggest that there is a strong link between what people think about the news, and what they learn from it.

The South African Conflict

Like political campaigns, highly visible confrontations provide valuable opportunities for us to examine the importance of interest and involvement as factors which influence the amount of knowledge derived from media exposure. Interest in politics and involvement in political campaigns have been shown to be important correlates of knowledge about candidates and issues. We may suggest that the path from interest to knowledge flows through intentional media consumption and utilization of other information sources, including direct involvement in activities related to the campaign. Similarly, media use may stimulate personal involvement in a political movement at the same time that it provides for the development of greater awareness of the participants and the issues involved (Tan, 1980).

The struggle against apartheid and in search of guarantees of equal rights to all citizens of the Republic of South Africa is one which has continued since the institutionalization of this racist policy, and has periodically captured front page headlines for weeks at a time. Following the Soweto uprising in June, 1976, and almost continually since November 1984, this issue has maintained a highly visible position on the world's political agenda (Ungar, 1985). A review of the indices of four major daily newspapers (New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Wall Street Journal) revealed more than 1,100 citations of news stories and editorials published between January and September, 1985. The demonstrations led by the "Free South Africa Movement," as well as the numerous student-led demonstrations on the nation's campuses to motivate university disinvestment in firms which do business with the South African regime, have provided numerous opportunities for students to become actively involved in the movement.

Thus, the South African conflict provides an excellent opportunity to examine the relationships between: a) media use, b) media reliance, c) media evaluations, d) personal involvement, e) knowledge of the conflict, and f) recommendations for its resolution.

Research design

The Instrument

A questionnaire was developed to measure use, reliance, evaluation, involvement, knowledge and policy recommendations. A four-item scale measuring involvement, based on a measure developed by Miller (1977), asked respondents to indicate how frequently they demonstrated, signed petitions, donated money, or attended meetings, rallies or lectures. Each item ranged from Frequently (1) to Never (4). Items were added together to create a single index (Activity, Alpha=.748).

Media use was measured by asking respondents to indicate the number of days in the past seven that they did each of the following: a) read a newspaper, b) watched an early or late evening news program on tv, or c) listened to an early or late evening news program on the radio. As a measure of reliance, respondents were asked to rank seven information sources in terms of "the amount of useful information they have provided you" about the South African conflict. Rankings were to be accomplished by assigning the numbers one(1) through seven(7) to the sources which included other people and public meetings, in addition to the traditional mass media.

As a measure of evaluation of the sources which the respondents identify as being most useful, four additional items were included. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the following descriptions of their favored sources: a) provides detailed information on the subject, b) allows the actors involved to speak for themselves, c)provides more emotional impact in its presentaton and d) provides different perspectives on the issues.

In order to develop knowl. dge and opinion measures for this study, a pretest was administered to 26 undergraduate students in a History of Broadcasting and Film Class. Item analysis was used to select those items which discriminated best between the most and the least knowledgeable students. Fifteen items were used in the final questionnaire, and these items tested knowledge of personalities, international relations, and economic and political realities in South Africa. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with declarative statements about the South African conflict. Responses ranged from Agree Strongly (1) to Disagree Strongly (5). Several responses were recoded so that strong agreement with a "correct" statement would be coded one (1).

Six policy recommendations were selected on the basis of their maximal variance in measures of agreement or disagreement with policy options as stated.

The Sample

The questionaire was administered for self-completion between September 16-27, 1985 to students enrolled in undergraduate Principles of Speech classes at a traditionally and predominantly Black university in Washington, DC. Four hundred and two questionnaires were coded for analysis. Of those responding to the question, 61.8 % indicated that they were female. Of those indicating a nationality, 80.3% were from the U.S., 7% were from Africa, and 11.3% were from Caribbean nations. Of the 92.8% who indicated their racial group, 98.9% identified themselves as Black.

If we examine the individual items of the involvement scale, we see that the group was relatively inactive (Table One). Seventy-four percent of those responding indicated that they never demonstrated, despite the fact that demonstrations were scheduled each day in their city. The greatest opportunity for involvement was that provided vicariously through the media, as nearly all reported some effort to inform themselves about the issue.

Table One Here

Table Two indicates the relative frequency with which they utilized the primary news media. They were relatively more likely to utilize the electronic news media than they were to read the newspaper during the week. As is indicated in Table Three, however, reliance, or perceived utility of the newspapers is somewhat greater than that of radio, although substantially less than that reported for television.

Tables Two and Three Here

Findings

Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with fifteen different assertions about the South African conflict. Conceptually, the items could be linked in terms of their identification of key individuals (Biko, Robinson, Mandela), their knowledge of foreign relations (Libya, UN, USSR), or their knowledge of economic facts (Gold, Kruggerrand). Unfortunately, respondents did not respond to these items as though they shared any underlying dimension. Neither factor analysis or estimations of a reliability coefficient (Chronbach's Alpha) supported the creation of any subindices. Instead, items are reported individually (Table Four), and where respondents answered at least ten, as a cumulative score (KNOW, alpha=.629).

Table Four

Items were recoded so that agreement with correct assertions would receive a lower score. If we consider 3.0 as the uncertain midpoint, then Table Four indicates that for nearly all items, the tendency was toward agreement with the correct assertion. The most strongly held perceptions were those surrounding Apartheid as a system of legalized racism (Apartheid), their rejection of South Africa's constitution's guaranteeing equal participation (Constitution), and a similarly strong rejection of the assertion that Jerry Falwell was an admirer of Desmond Tutu (Falwell).

Table Five

Table Five reveals the distribution of responses to questions about a variety of policy options which might be pursued in the search for solutions to the conflict. As with the knowledge questions, neither factor analysis nor reliability estimates justified the combination of responses into any subindices, although several logical possibilities present themselves.

The reported means indicate that few of the options received strong support from the respondents. The strongest support was for the call for the United States to sever all diplomatic ties with South Africa, the least acceptable alternative was for the U.S. to overthrow the regime militarily. There was somewhat more support for having independent African nations to unite to invade South Africa.

Table Six

Table Six examines the relationships between different measures of news media use and reliance, and perspectives toward the South African conflict. News1, Radio1 and TV1 are measures of media use. These indicators were developed by asking respondents to indicate how frequently they used the respective media for news. Thus the scores ranged from 1-7. These scores were recoded so that the greatest use (6-7 times) was recorded as one, 4-5 times as two, and the rest in order to five. News2, TV2 and Radio2 are indicators of the relative importance of those media as sources of relevant information (a traditional measure of reliance). Respondents ranked each medium from most important (1) to least important (7) in terms of the information about the South African conflict they provided, and their responses were recoded in similar fashion to the use variables so as to create a five point scale.

The fifteen variables representing knowledge of the participants in the conflict, the nature of the economic relations, and the constitutional limitations faced by the African residents were combined into a single additive index (Knowledge). If we examine the correlations between these traditional use and reliance measures we would conclude that for this population, media use and reliance plays only a marginal role in differentiating between individuals. Out of 138 correlation coefficients, only 14, or approximately 10% are significant at the 5% level. On only one knowledge question do we find more than one use or reliance measure emerging as a significant correlate.

When asked if the United Nations promotes trade with South Africa (UN positions), it is the three reliance measures which emerge as significant. As all variables are either coded, or recoded so that agreement with a correct statement would be assigned a lower score, we should interpret the negative coefficients to mean that media use or reliance is associated with holding false impressions of the conflict. Thus, with the exception of newspaper reading, other measures of use and reliance indicate that the media users are deriving incorrect assessments of the UN's position regarding trade.

Table Six presents a similar analysis with regard to the various policy positions respondents could take as ways to respond to the crisis. While different observers might code the valence of these responses differently, we would agree that media use and reliance was not very important in the formation of these policy positions. There are very few cases where users of different media differed in their preferred policy positions. However, with regard to the suggestions that Africans should lobby peacefully for their rights (coded so that rejection was the preferred response), we find that radio users were quite likely to take this more radical position, and they differed with the television news viewers in their position regarding a policy of diplomatic disengagement by the US (Sever ties). Radio users tended to prefer disengagement, while television news users tended to reject that option.

Correlations not reported in Table Six revealed that several other background and behavioral variables were more closely associated with different perceptions or policy positions than were media use or reliance measures. Among the most important were gender, national origin and degree of activity regarding the conflict. In order to examine the relative importance of the media use and reliance variables when the influence of these other factors were statistically controlled, multiple regression

was utilized to identify the best independent predictors of knowledge.

Gender and national origin were all dummy coded. Activity was created as an additive index utilizing variables identified in Table One, and as with other measures, the lower scores were associated with the greatest activity. Reliance measures represent the interaction of the frequency with which one reported using a particular medium, and the rank which one assigned to that medium in terms of its value as a source of information. Thus, those media which were used most frequently, and were ranked highest would receive the lowest reliance score. Scores ranged from 1-25.

Table Seven presents a single significant equation with only four significant predictors. None of the other variables made any significant contribution to knowledge once these variables had been included in the model. The most important predictor was the extent to which respondents sought to inform themselves about the conflict. African students, representing approximately 7% of the sample, tended to be more knowledgeable than their American counterparts. Those who were more active were also more knowldgeable, while those who depended on other persons as information sources tended to know less.

Table Seven

	Independent Variables(Standardized Betas)			
Knowledge R-squared=.157	.Informed (.259)	.African (.177)	.Active (.137)	.Folk (-.095)

Discussion

This study does not reinforce the traditional conclusions that suggest that reliance on television is associated with lower levels of knowledge and understanding. Insteadas in previous studies of this population, the overwhelming conclusion is that the mass media play only a marginal role in the formation of their impressions about important social issues. And while there appears to be a slight edge associated with newspaper reliance, the number of such relationships are too rare to support any strong conclusions.

The analyses reveal considerable variation in media use, reliance, involvement and perspectives on the issue. However, as with the Jesse Jackson campaign, where there was strong involvement on the part of the students, involvement accounted for most of the variance in attitudinal measures (Gandy and Coleman, 1985).

Involvement is an important index of interest in a particular topic or issue, and interest or motivation may serve to increase an individual's ability to derive understanding from whatever source they utilize (Culbertson and Stempel, 1985). Conversely, to the extent that lack of involvement is a reflection of lack of interest in the issue, it will not matter which medium one relies upon, one is likely to soon forget the essential parts of a related story (Graber, 1982).

We remain unconvinced, however, that there is not more to be discovered about the relationships between use, reliance, evaluations of media characteristics and social perceptions. The fact that logically connected dimensions of knowledge of the conflict were not confirmed by factor analysis raises questions about the kind of knowledge actually being measured here. It is not at all clear that the kind of measures used to assess knowledge are specific enough to be dependent upon careful processing of mass media information. For many of the knowledge measures, students selected the middle or "unsure" response. Such options are not available in the traditional true/false test, and the forced choice may have produced a more reliable assessment of knowledge. Future analyses of this dataset will explore the relations between use, reliance and actual knowledge votes and policy preferences.

While it is clear that interest and involvement play a critical role in the effective processing of mass media information, it is difficult to believe that it matters so little which medium one uses.

Table One

Involvement in the South African Conflict (%)

Activity	N	Frequently	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
Demonstrated	381	7(1.8)	42(11.0)	51(12.7)	281(73.8)
Signed a Petition	389	43(11.1)	104(26.7)	70(18.0)	172(44.2)
Donated Money	383	12(3.1)	56(14.6)	72(18.8)	243(63.4)
Attended Meeting	395	40(10.1)	117(29.6)	94(23.8)	144(36.5)
Informed Themself	402	195(48.5)	143(35.6)	46(11.4)	18(4.5)

Table Two

Frequency of News Media Use(%)

Medium	6-7 Times	4-5 Times	Median
Newspapers	73(21.4)	83(24.3)	2.713
Television	156(44.7)	98(28.1)	1.689
Radio	159(50.2)	63(19.9)	1.497

Table Three

Utility of Information Sources(Rankings)

Source	First	Second	Median
Other People	50(12.9)	50(12.9)	3.67
Radio	46(11.9)	82(21.2)	3.36
Newspapers	69(17.8)	109(28.1)	2.75
Magazines	36(9.4)	38(9.9)	3.76
Meetings	43(11.5)	37(9.9)	4.25
Television	168(42.5)	78(19.7)	1.88

Table Four

Perceptions of the South African Conflict
Agreement with Assertions of Fact(%)*

Assertion	N	Agree	Disagree	Mean	(s.d.)
Biko as Leader	374	42(11.2)	4(1.1)	2.64	(.771)
Robinson Leads	373	52(13.9)	4(1.1)	2.57	(.829)
Libya Involved	379	31(8.2)	12(3.2)	2.90	(.833)
Rand's Value	378	72(19.0)	17(4.5)	2.56	(1.026)
Gold's Importance	376	47(12.5)	14(3.7)	2.64	(1.023)
Artists' Boycott	364	43(11.8)	10(2.7)	2.66	(.947)
Apartheid is Racism	380	240(63.2)	19(5.0)	1.60	(1.019)
Mandela's in Prison	376	138(36.7)	9(2.4)	2.11	(1.050)
Constitution	376	212(56.4)	13(3.5)	1.82	(1.096)
UN Supports Trade	376	46(12.2)	30(8.0)	3.043	(1.135)
USSR Trades	373	56(15.0)	13(3.5)	2.64	(.962)
African Passes	376	91(24.2)	40(10.6)	2.58	(1.283)
Kruggerand Sales	371	81(21.8)	6(1.6)	2.35	(.918)
Afrikaaner's Names	369	59(16.0)	22(6.0)	2.64	(.975)
Falwell Admires	377	233(61.8)	7(1.9)	1.65	(.975)

* Lower scores indicate stronger agreement with correct assertions

Table Five

Agreement with Policy Options(%)*

Options	N	Agree	Disagree	Mean	(s.d.)
U.S. Severs Ties	364	174(47.8)	57(17.6)	2.33	(1.566)
Mandela Renounce Violence	354	125(35.3)	57(16.1)	2.51	(1.458)
African Nations Invade	357	120(33.6)	78(21.8)	2.73	(1.564)
Whites Should Leave	357	93(26.1)	90(25.2)	3.23	(1.543)
African Should Lobby	351	94(26.8)	101(28.8)	3.05	(1.594)

* Lower scores indicate stronger agreement with policy options

Table Six

Correlations Between Media Use, Importance and Perceptions and Policies toward the Conflict
(Pearson's, decimals dropped, N=161)

Perceptions	News1	News2	TV1	TV2	Radio1	Radio2
Knowledge	152	-030	-021	-104	112	040
Desmond Tutu	171	000	-002	-120	052	-112
Nelson Mandela	-066	-080	031	-001	-103	037
Steve Biko	127	119	030	012	016	045
Robinson	278	120	113	039	067	085
Libya	065	-034	-002	-012	-033	-032
Kruggerand	095	025	143	-093	156	099
Gold's value	-066	-159	022	-031	-086	-093
Artists's boycott	053	-110	070	-113	-012	-144
Apartheid is racism	130	-042	013	-003	163	031
Mandela imprisonment	029	082	-039	-018	-044	-057
Constitutional gaps	076	042	-130	035	261	076
UN positions	147	-162	-085	-155	-058	-167
USSR involvement	030	-044	-109	-066	-062	-012
Kruggerand sales	150	-041	038	-086	-007	041
Pass Laws	-099	-002	-109	-062	062	157
Afrikaaners	018	034	004	-075	089	-078
Falwell's view	080	036	-027	016	216	120
Sever ties	-046	-011	-132	-072	111	103
Reject Violence	190	106	110	031	051	050
Overthrow them	-145	-184	009	-084	-090	-123
African Unity	-116	-091	-028	-072	079	081
Whites should leave	-062	054	-019	086	008	085
Africans should lobby	-037	013	076	-027	235	032

For all r greater than .155, $p<.05$ (two-tailed)

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